

MACAULAY'S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY

21

narration Thucydides did not always attain absolute perfection. ' I read the eighth book of Thucydides. On the whole he is the first of historians. What is good in him is better than anything that can be found elsewhere. But his dry parts are dreadfully dry; and his arrangement is bad. Mere chronological order is not the order for a complicated narrative/ ¹

Next to Thucydides, amongst the ancients, Macaulay placed Tacitus. ' Of the Latin historians, Tacitus was certainly the greatest/ But he thought that his style was inferior to that of Thucydides, and that he did not tell his story so well. ' His style indeed is not only faulty in itself, but is, in some respects, peculiarly unfit for historical composition. He carries his love of effect far beyond the limits of moderation. He tells a fine story finely : but he cannot tell a plain story plainly/ ²

On the other hand, said Macaulay, there was one part of the historian's art in which Tacitus surpassed Thucydides—in which, indeed, he had no equal amongst ancient historians.

In the delineation of character, Tacitus . . . has very few superiors among dramatists and novelists. By the delineation of character, we do not mean the practice of drawing up epigrammatic catalogues of good and bad qualities, and appending them to the names of eminent men. No writer, indeed, has done this more

skilfully than
Tacitus : but this is not his peculiar glory. All
the persons
who occupy a large space in his works have
an individu-
ality of character which seems to pervade all
their words
and actions. We know them as if we had lived
with them.
Claudius, Nero, Otho, both the Agrippinas,
are master-
pieces. But Tiberius is a still higher miracle
of art. The
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¹Journal, Dec. 4, 1848. Ibid. ii.
245.

²Edinburgh Review, May 1828, p.
350.